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John J. Conley, *Adoration and Annihilation: The Convent Philosophy of Port-Royal*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009. xiv + 303 pp. Appendices, notes, works cited, and index. \$50.00 (US) ISBN (cl). 978-0-268-02296-9.

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John J. Conley comes to the first comprehensive overview in French or English of the major writings of Port-Royal's three Arnauld abbesses—the sisters Angélique (1591-1661) and Agnès Arnauld (1693-1671), and their niece Angélique de Saint-Jean d'Andilly (1624-1684)—having published a study of seventeenth-century *salonnières* in which he argues that they should be read as philosophers, as well as translations of texts by Jacqueline Pascal and Madame de Maintenon. [1]

Conley's book takes its place within recent trends in Port-Royal scholarship that seek to situate the quarrels over grace in a larger context. One strand views Port-Royal exceptionalism within broad currents in the seventeenth-century church, such as Tridentine monastic reform, Gallicanism, Augustinianism, or the spirituality of the French School. Another strand examines the nuns' resistance to signing the formulary in terms of gender. A third current highlights Port-Royal's "progressive" aspects that have been accepted by the church: its defense of access by the laity to scripture and liturgical texts and its stance in favor of the rights of conscience.

In the introduction, Conley argues that the abbesses display a gendered form of Augustinianism. Their texts propose sustained argument on three issues long considered philosophical: the difficulty of attaining positive knowledge of God, virtue theory, and human freedom. Conley situates them in the tradition of apophatic theology that stresses God's incomprehensibility and names him in terms of negative attributes. He also seeks to shift the center of gravity from Jansen's account of grace to "the Oratorian school's highly Platonized version of Augustine" (p. 35) which influenced Port-Royal in the 1620s, before contact with Jansen's thought. To this end, Conley highlights the themes of *anéantissement* and adoration that were central to chief representatives of the French School, the Oratorians Pierre de Bérulle and Charles de Condren. He explains that the abbesses' philosophy has been ignored, not only because its authors are women who were overshadowed by males associated with Port-Royal, but also for political reasons. First, too much credence has been given to claims by the nuns and their supporters that they were ignorant of the theological controversies they found themselves embroiled in. Instead, Conley attributes to the abbesses "a sophisticated grasp" of the issues (p. 31). Second, the Augustinianism that they defended lost decisively to "the Jesuits' muscular Christianity" which "molded a modern Catholicism" that can scarcely comprehend the spirituality the abbesses represented (p. 3). After this substantial introduction, Conley devotes a chapter to each abbess, first summarizing her life, then examining her major works thematically, with emphasis on the three philosophical issues he had identified.

When dealing with Angélique Arnauld's treatment of God's attributes, Conley notes that she does at times point to positive qualities such as God's mercy and justice, but he is more interested in the importance he says she lays on incomprehensibility (p. 94). His examples (p. 61-65; 94), however, deal more with the difficulty of understanding his ways than with the divine attributes themselves, and a

reader could object that they represent less a case of negative theology than a prudent refusal to assign an interpretation to this or that event beyond accepting it as God's will. The sections devoted to virtue theory stress Angélique's rejection of the "Christian Aristotelianism of the Jesuits" (p. 85) which taught that generic moral virtues such as temperance and fortitude could be acquired by any human and were crowned by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (p. 96). She denounces such generic virtues as illusory and interprets the theological ones as the product of divine grace overcoming the effects of concupiscence. Conley's discussion of how she gives an Augustinian cast to monastic virtues such as piety, poverty, and humility is particularly well done. The sections on her treatment of grace and freedom emphasize "her categorical refusal to concede human freedom a role in the act of salvation" (p. 104). He devotes attention to her "ethics of resistance to abuses of power" (p. 108), while identifying a gendered philosophy of power when exercised by abbesses or queens (p. 109-110).

The chapter on Agnès Arnauld is central to Conley's title, *Adoration and Annihilation*, because these themes first became prominent at Port-Royal in her 1626 *Private Chaplet of the Blessed Sacrament*, written under the influence of Condren. Conley shows their continued importance in her *Image of a Perfect and Imperfect Nun* and the *Spirit of Port-Royal*. He finds one strand of the originality of the *Constitutions* in what he calls its insistence on freedom, for example, "vocational freedom," according to which postulants are accepted only on the basis of an authentic calling to the religious life, without regard to their family's ability to provide a dowry, and "spiritual freedom" which allows a nun choose the method of meditation that best suits her. A second strand of originality requires self-governance of the monastery by its duly elected abbess according to the procedures set forth in its constitutions. He then shows how Agnès appeals to this principle to justify resistance to attempts to impose an abbess from the outside. Conley concludes that her philosophic corpus is grounded in her militant, apophatic theocentrism that sees God as wholly other. Recognition of one's nothingness leads to a stance of adoration. To act virtuously requires utter dependence on grace. Resistance to oppression can only be transformed into a means of attaining union with God through the cultivation of abandonment to providence.

In what strikes me as the most successful chapter of the book, Conley stresses how Angélique de Saint-Jean's refusal of compromise hardened her aunts' moral rigorism and eliminated much of the nuance in their approach to resistance. Persecution of the monastery intensified in the last years of her abbacy, and an obsession with martyrdom and victimization color every aspect of the way she reprised her aunts' treatment of negative theology, the tension between grace and freedom, and strategies of resistance. Conley shows, for example, how she recast monastic virtues such as humility in terms of martyrdom and how she justified uncompromising resistance by appealing to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

An appendix offers the French text of letters of Angélique Arnauld to her brother Antoine, Agnès's *Private Chaplet*, and their niece's *On the Danger of Hesitation*. While only the *Private Chaplet* is available in a modern French edition, it might have been more useful to provide English translations, especially since elsewhere in the book, quotations and titles are only given in English.

Conley makes his most original contribution by pointing to the prominence of the themes of adoration and annihilation. Since they furnish the book's title, their meaning and history of deserve more elucidation. As R. Daeschler's points out in his overview of *anéantissement*, Bérulle gave his own twist to a tradition that had its scriptural roots in Saint Paul and that culminated in popularity in the seventeenth century. Among its proponents, Daeschler lists Johannes Tauler, Catherine of Genoa, the *Imitation of Christ*, as well as François de Sales and Jean de Bernières in the seventeenth century. [2] However, no studies of annihilation or of the works of major Oratorians appear in the works cited.

Agnès Arnauld certainly wrote the *Private Chapelet* under Condren's direction, and Conley is right to point out that Saint-Cyran was influenced by Bérulle and Condren's views on *anéantissement*. But his contention that Condren continued to influence the monastery after Saint-Cyran replaced the

Oratorians as director of monastery, calls for nuance. Louis Cognet observed that Angélique was “impermeable” to Condren in the 1620s when her sister had fallen under the Oratorian’s sway. [3] Conley finds evidence for Condren’s “patent” influence on Angélique in her use of néantist themes in her commentary on the Rule of Saint Benedict (p. 60), which probably date from the 1650s. If she found this ubiquitous theme congenial in the 1650s, any influence of Condren is likely filtered through Saint-Cyran, who had incorporated the theme of annihilation into his own penitential spirituality.

Gender has been a central concern in Port-Royal studies recently, but Conley makes little use of this work. He criticizes Daniella Kostroun’s 1999 dissertation for calling the Port-Royal nuns feminists (p. 42), but ignores her 2003 article on the feminine paradox. [4] He is most successful in my eyes in his discussion of how negative theology promotes a non-gendered account of God (cf. p. 240). His account of the “gender-related principles” of Angélique Arnauld’s reform—the election of the abbess by the chapter, the spiritual authority of the abbess within her monastery, the right of the community to follow the procedures of its constitutions, etc.—does not sufficiently take into account that these are not unique to Port-Royal, but, as Elizabeth Rapley shows, standard practice in reformed monasteries and new foundations in the wake of the Council of Trent. [5] It was not just the abbesses of Port-Royal who sought to protect the mother superior’s right to supervise the spiritual lives of her nuns. The Ursuline foundress Antoinette Micolon, who gratefully acknowledged her debt to the Jesuits, described in her memoirs how she limited the role of confessors. [6] Port-Royal invoked these principles of autonomy in the quarrels over the formulary, just as other communities of nuns did in disputes with their bishops.

In discussing the intellectual climate among the nuns of Port-Royal, Conley could distinguish more between the theological culture of the abbesses and their nuns, as well as between periods in the monastery’s history. It would have been useful to take into account Linda Timmermans’ contrast between the early Port-Royal of Angélique Arnauld, who was opposed to intellectual culture for her nuns, especially theological learning, and the second generation of her niece. Angélique Arnauld accepted the commonly held position that systematic, reasoned knowledge of philosophical and theological issues (science) was the domain of male theologians. Nuns (and the laity in general) should limit themselves to spiritual profit and avoid vain curiosity, the *libido sciendi*, and dogmatic controversies. An abbess, because of her duty to guide her community spiritually, should have a deeper theological culture than that of her nuns, but not necessarily that of a theologian. If her house came under accusation, she likewise had a duty to inform herself because of her leadership role. Timmermans argues that this represents the stance of Angélique and Agnès Arnauld. She goes on to identify a group of six or seven younger nuns, the “théologiennes” including Angélique de Saint-Jean, who did delve into formal theology as the formulary controversy unfolded. [7]

Thus Conley tends to exaggerate the intellectual climate experienced by the nuns of the first generation. Likewise, in isolating the philosophical strand in the thought of the abbesses themselves Conley risks overstating it. Angélique Arnauld is the least amenable to being read as a philosopher, and Conley concedes “the limitations of her philosophical reflection” (p. 110). He finds her account of human freedom and responsibility contradictory (111). However, should we really be surprised that her “argument routinely remains within an epistemology that circumscribes the truth within the virtue of faith...” (p. 110)? She constantly reminded her nuns to pray for grace if they wished to receive it because she saw the question of freedom as one side of the larger mystery of grace. Louis Cognet’s description of the stance of Saint-Cyran applies as well to her own: “Le salut dépend de la miséricorde divine, mais l’homme n’en a pas moins le devoir de prier et de travailler comme si tout dépendait de lui” [8] When correcting her nuns, Angélique often spoke a peremptory manner that lacked theological nuance. Conley focuses on remarks that seem to deny all human cooperation with grace (pp. 104–106), without reconciling them with others that allow humans a measure of cooperation. [9]

In his desire to read the abbesses as philosophers, Conley sometimes neglects the genres they used. He labels at least four of Agnès’ occasional works “treatises,” as if they were theoretical texts that furnish a

formal, systematic treatment of a subject. The least conducive to this analysis is her short meditation, the *Private Chaplet*, which Conley calls a “devotional treatise” (p. 128) and whose Eucharistic theology he criticizes as glacial and narrow. But it is too much to expect that this brief text, a *chapelet de dévotion*, dashed off quickly, should contain a complete sacramental exposition.

While Conley’s reading of the philosophical content of individual texts is stimulating, the overall yield is often disappointing. Readers may wonder how useful it is to be told that Angélique Arnauld’s thought was “agnostic” (p. 110) and that “the greatest philosophical contribution” of her niece was a “diffuse nihilism” (p. 235). Over and over, the discussion of the abbesses’ philosophy leads back to some point of Catholic theology or devotional practice. The seventeenth century may have been the Age of Augustine (p. 29), but the book does little to encourage readers to understand why so many were attracted to Augustine as an alternative to scholasticism, much less to Port-Royal. This, coupled with the lack of contextualization of *anéantissement* and women’s monasticism, and of engagement with the full range of previous scholarship limit the book’s potential as an introduction to the Arnauld abbesses. On the other hand, specialists familiar with the spiritual and historical context will profit from Conley’s reconstruction of what he ultimately calls their “anti-philosophy” (p. 238).

NOTES

[1] John J. Conley, *The Suspicion of Virtue: Women Philosophers in Neoclassical France*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002); Jacqueline Pascal, *Rule for Children and Other Writing*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Madame de Maintenon, *Dialogues and Addresses*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[2] R. Daeschler, “Anéantissement,” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1937) : 1: 560-565.

[3] Louis Cognet, *La Spiritualité moderne: I. L’essor: 1500-1650*. (Paris, Aubier, 1966), p. 461.

[4] Daniella J. Kostroun, “A Formula for Disobedience: Jansenism, Gender and the Feminist Paradox,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75 (2003): 483-522.

[5] Elizabeth Rapley, *A Social History of the Cloister: Daily Life in the Teaching Monasteries of the Old Regime*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2001).

[6] Linda Lierheimer, tr. and ed. *The Life of Antoinette Micolon*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), p. 89-91.

[7] Linda Timmermans “*La Religieuse parfaite* et la théologie: l’attitude de la Mère Agnès à l’égard de la participation aux controverses,” *Chroniques de Port-Royal* 43 (1994): 97-112.

[8] *La Spiritualité moderne*, p. 479.

[9] *Entretiens ou Conférences*, (Bruxelles/Paris: Antoine Boudet, 1757), pp. 250-251; ms. BNF f. fr. 17794 première partie, fol. 13.

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